

Communications Workers of America, District 4, opposes Telecom Dereg proposal in Lame Duck session

COLUMBUS - Telecom Giants are pushing through an amendment in Lame Duck session designed to wreck Provider of Last Resort Rules (POLR). These rules ensure that everyone in Ohio has access to critical voice telephone service. The Telecom companies are trying to do away with POLR requirements with an amendment to Agriculture Bill (HB 490) In 2010, CWA worked on a Bi-Partisan Bill that nearly unanimously passed the Ohio House and Senate that protected Jobs and Consumers, particularly the rural and elderly customers.

Based on the 2010 Bill, telephone companies already have the option to apply to withdraw basic local exchange service through the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO), if the company shows financial hardship and the request is "just, reasonable, and not contrary to the public interest."

The new amendment would:

1. Eliminate provider of last resort obligations.
2. The amendment also creates a new service, called "voice service." (Section 4927.01(18). A provider of voice service is not required to meet the obligations of basic local exchange service. (Section 4927.01(a)(ix). The Commission has an obligation to ensure the availability of adequate basic local exchange service or voice service to citizens throughout the state (Section 4927.02(1).

If the new, risky amendment passes, basic telephone customers could also lose protections from lengthy outages, unreasonable bill payment timelines, customer credits, disconnection and reconnection requirements, and the legislation could jeopardize Lifeline service for low-income landline customers.

Changes in telecom regulation are too important – impacting public safety, jobs, and the economy -- to be wrecked or decided by a sneaky amendment to an Ag Bill in Lame Duck Session. Ohio's rural and elderly customers deserve more respect than this.

Ohio should not jump the gun on allowing a telephone provider to retire its services at the same time that the FCC is investigating the impact of this deregulation trend nationally. Ohio should wait to see what lessons emerge from the FCC investigation and make wise decisions about Ohioan's communications needs.